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(Re)Sequencing the Research/Writing Process in the Writing Classroom

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2014 WRITING INSTRUCTION RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS
Closing Report

Researchers' Names, Department(s), and email addresses:

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Date study was completed:

Spring 2014

Title of Study:

(Re)Sequencing the Research/Writing Process in the Writing Classroom

Research Question(s):

What are the outcomes of sequencing writing assignments so that students are introduced to primary sources and allowed to browse these sources prior to selecting a research topic? (This as opposed to the standard sequence by which instructors ask students to choose a topic before completing any sort of preliminary research in source material.)

Method(s):

We worked with one section of ENG 454, a creative nonfiction writing course. Thirteen students were enrolled in the course. Along with Professor Paola, Lee and Megan accompanied the class to Wilson Library's Special Collections. There, librarians and archivists introduced students to the primary sources available in the university's Heritage Resources collections, both in Special Collections and in the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies. Students browsed materials in Special Collections along with sample materials brought from the CPNS. Lee and Megan spoke briefly about their own experiences using research in creative nonfiction writing. Students were then asked to create writing prompts based on primary sources in the room.

Professor Paola's section of ENG 454 requires a research-based essay; after their introduction to Heritage Resources, students could either proceed with a topic they already had in mind before the visit, or they could begin researching/writing on a new topic.

After the trip to Heritage Resources, Lee and Megan visited the class to lead a short in-class reflective writing prompt about the experience. Students did not turn in this writing, but were asked to use it in responding to a Survey Monkey questionnaire.

We designed our questionnaire to allow students to reflect upon and to write about—using scaled responses and open-ended response fields—the process of browsing primary sources, selecting a topic/research question, pursuing further research, and writing about their topic. We observed this process, or "(re)sequencing" as we call it here, as opposed to the more standard process wherein an instructor expects and even requires students to produce a topic/research question before any preliminary browsing of source material has been completed on the part of the student.

Key Findings from Study:

Nine students completed the survey, and a tenth student answered just the first few questions. All but one respondent indicated that they thought preliminary research was helpful as part of topic selection, and most indicated that they primarily used online research in the writing process. Half of the participants had been to Special Collections before. Just over half agreed that their research-related confidence had increased as a result of the guided introduction to Heritage Resources, and most of them indicated that they were now at least somewhat more likely to incorporate primary sources into their creative writing projects.

Perhaps the most interesting and encouraging finding was the number of participants who changed or modified the research topic they had previously selected. We had hoped to visit Special Collections early enough in the quarter that students would not have chosen topics for their required research-based essay, however, the visit occurred later, after most of the student had already begun work on these essays. Even so, two students responded that they changed their topics based on materials they found during the visit, and three others found materials that allowed them to rethink or expand the topics they had already chosen. Three students indicated that, although they did not change their current topics, they found source material for projects they might pursue in the future.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

We hoped to contribute to a better pedagogical understanding of how to sequence writing assignments and to promote research of primary (and secondary) sources in order to increase writing and research proficiency. We also hoped our project would, ideally, lead to improved writing and research skills on the part of our student population, leading to transferrable skills and strategies that would benefit them in the classroom and beyond.

Most of the students agreed that (re)sequencing to allow primary source browsing prior to topic selection was a useful strategy that they would repeat in the future. Several expressed the wish that the introduction to Heritage Resources happen earlier in the process.

Gains/Challenges in Faculty-Student Collaboration:

This was a graduate student-led project initially conceived and designed primarily by Lee; Professor Paola provided access to her upper-division creative nonfiction writing class and allowed us to use her regular instructional time for the study. This gave the graduate student research partners valuable experience in proposing, designing and leading a research project related to the scholarship of teaching and learning, including completing the Human Subjects Research Exemption process. Challenges for this type of study include continuity and sustaining the study over the course of a calendar year – students graduate, and future teaching schedules may be uncertain.

Implications for Further Study:

What might be the benefit(s) of writing process (re)sequencing and Heritage Resources introduction in lower level writing courses (ideally, earlier in the undergraduate college career), and across disciplines?